

Transcript: Navigating Mainstream Reflections From Cultural Leaders

JACKI CHERNICOFF: Good afternoon, or good morning, everyone, depending on where you're joining us from today. Thank you for joining our virtual session, Navigating Mainstream-- Reflections From Cultural Leaders.

For those of you who've joined us before, welcome back. And for those of you who are joining us for the first time, we're really glad you're here. My name is Jacki Chernicoff with the Center on Victimization and Safety at the Vera Institute of Justice and the National Resource Center for Reaching Victims.

With that, I want to turn things over to Olga Trujillo, who will introduce herself and the panelists for today's discussion. Thank you.

OLGA TRUJILLO: Thanks so much, Jacki. So hi, everyone. My name is Olga Trujillo, and I live in Star Prairie, Wisconsin, which is a town of about 500 people. And I'm going to turn to my co-presenters first, and then I'll introduce myself further after that. So, Jeigh, do you want to start us off, tell us a little bit about you?

JEIGH BILLINGY: Sure thing. Hi, I am Jeigh Billiny. I currently reside in Chattanooga, Tennessee. I am a master's of social work and a licensed clinical social worker. I work with populations that

are navigating severe and complex trauma and PTSD, and I work in the community to teach how to use trauma as a base for information with integrating in culturally specific and aware areas.

OLGA TRUJILLO: Awesome. And then also, Jeigh, I wanted to let folks know, to if you wanted to say anything more, you've recently started your own organization and work in a mainstream organization.

JEIGH BILLINGY: Yes. Yes. I've worked in mainstream organizations for, I say, going on 12 years now. And I recently have started my own practice, and I'm very excited.

OLGA TRUJILLO: Awesome. Cool. And then we have one of my favorite people in the whole world, Jorge Vidal. You want to introduce yourself, Jorge?

JORGE VIDAL: Sure. Thank you, Olga. Saludos. That means hello in Spanish. I just wanted to welcome everyone. I'm really thankful that you have joined us from all the corners of the United States. It feels like a very diverse group, so I'm really thankful for being here with us.

My name is Jorge Vidal, like Olga Trujillo said. And I work at Caminar Latino, and that's a national organization. Well, it's an organization based in Atlanta, and there's a national arm called

Lupe, L-U-P-E. And that's the national arm for Caminar Latino. And I am the director of training and capacity building.

And the reason why we created this space is just from experience navigating mainstream as a cultural leader doing programmatic work, but then also as a national TA provider now with Lupe. And I'll share a little bit more as we go through, but I think that's kind of the beginning pieces that I would like to share about myself. And I'm saying hello from Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

OLGA TRUJILLO: Awesome. And I'm Olga Trujillo. I have been working for a really long time. Let's see. I graduated from law school in 1988. Oh, my god, that makes me feel really old. And I worked as a lawyer in private practice. I've worked at the US Department of Justice, and I've been a consultant for 20 years. And then I have worked with other mainstream organizations in the domestic violence and sexual assault field for the past 10 years or so.

And again, I live in a really rural area, and that's a little bit-- I like to let people know that, because there's a little bit of experience being a person of color in a rural area. So that's always fun, too. All right, so I wanted to kind of let you know a little bit of what to expect from our webinar today.

What we're going to do is actually have a discussion about our experiences working in mainstream organizations and also

working in culturally specific organizations, at least Jorge and I. And then Jeigh, I think, a little bit behind your starting your own organization as well. So we're going to do this through discussion. I'll ask a few questions. I'll kind of moderate the discussion and then also jump in.

We were very deliberate in naming this webinar. It was important to us to talk about navigating mainstream organizations as a black, indigenous, or other person of color, as opposed to thriving. We went back and forth talking about it. Because I think I'll just say, from my personal experience, the place where I feel like I've thrived is in an organization that I helped to create that's culturally specific.

But then, in all the other organizations that I've worked, I've navigated the mainstream landscape and then learned a lot and built skills that I needed and that I use now quite a bit. Oh, and there's one other thing I wanted to mention, just because it's part of my identity. I also live with dissociative identity disorder and do a lot of work around trauma. So I have a legal background as well as have a significant mental health disorder and have learned and brought into my trainings how to move through the world with the idea.

I'm going to bring that into our discussion today as well, because there are other people I know that have mental health issues or disabilities that try to also maneuver through and navigate

through mainstream organizations. So our first discussion question is, how would you-- and I'll go to you first, Jeigh. Wait a minute, Jorge, is there anything--

JORGE VIDAL: Yeah.

OLGA TRUJILLO: You can tell, like I'm going to miss something here.

JORGE VIDAL: I also wanted to provide some context, too, I think a larger context. Because I think from personal experience, as we have been sharing that we've been navigating mainstream for some time now, and then also from experiences of friends who are also in the movement working in mainstream, and then us national TA providers, holding space for folks is a recurring theme that we have been hearing over and over that I think unites all of this narrative.

And it's that we are performing a way of being to survive in systems that are not built for us. And so what we wanted to do is give voice to that and also recognize that there has been hurt. And when we recognize that, as Olga mentioned, sometimes it may look a little messy. And he may not be linear, and there may be triggers along the way.

So I also want to put that out there, because I think we need to have this conversation in a way that we are mindful of our

triggers, we are mindful that there has been harm done. But we also want to give voice to that. And so I say that because I know with everything that has been happening, especially the distance, George Floyd, it seems like sometimes we're jumping on the wagon. But a lot of us have been working around these issues for a really long time, and it's something that we have felt and have brought into our conversations.

So I wanted to say that, because there's a larger context to this. And so it was just a perfect opportunity to bring it and have this discussion.

OLGA TRUJILLO: Yeah. Thanks, Jorge. And I'm always reminded, too, because I've been working for so long and I had to navigate so much of my career in mainstream, I have become kind of way more analytical and I've lost a little bit of that feel that is a little bit part of my culture. Jorge compliments my work all the time, because he's still able to be in his heart. So, anyway, thanks, Jorge.

OK, so how would you-- Jeigh, so I'll come to you. Tell us a little bit about your experience working in mainstream organizations.

JEIGH BILLINGY: Yes. And I also kind of want to just added a little bit, too, to kind of what Jorge was saying, because I definitely resonate with that. The bandwagon experience that some of us have shared and some of us might feel like we want

to help and we want to be present, but a lot of this is new for a lot of folks, right? Like if I can be honest, the Juneteenth situation, for example, coming from a Black American experience, a lot of us didn't know what that was until recently.

So I share that, coming from a mainstream experience where-- and to share a little bit about my history, too, with that. I grew up in Southern California in a very diverse environment. My family is from the Caribbean islands, and they immigrated to America in '70s-ish. My family is very educated. They lived the American dream to come get an education and climb up the socioeconomic status ladder.

But they've always believed that handouts are not a thing, right? And so coming to Chattanooga, Tennessee, where things are not as liberal and often there's a very different-- like just the cultural experience is different from Southern California. Coming into a place where I'm working in a mainstream headspace, coming with my open background that all things are possible, and then working with individuals who have been navigating themselves, coming to terms with what the history has been, I would say that that experience has been eye-opening for me as a learner in my own skin, if that makes sense.

So there's a layer to the experience that's not just my personal experience as a person who identifies as a black woman of color, right? But my own personal experience, just as a human,

navigating my own coming of age and coming of identity through the lens of my employment experience. And I really think that is something that needs to be highlighted.

OLGA TRUJILLO: Yeah. Thank you so much, Jeigh. And let's take a pause for just a minute as our interpreters switch out, and then I'll come back to you. OK, cool. So, yeah, that is awesome.

Thanks for kind of laying that foundation, because I think that's a really good thing for people to know. That experience of growing up and watching what your parents had to navigate as well as what you're navigating influenced all of us. So I really, really appreciate that.

I want to turn it back over to you to see what else kind of like your experiences have been, given all that.

JEIGH BILLINGY: And I will say I like to speak very openly and very transparently, so if anyone has any questions or if my statements, again, may sound triggering or insensitive in any way, that is not my intent at all. So please feel free to just reach out and respond. That is definitely open.

So if I can speak, when we talk about the cultural lens, obviously, I am navigating life as a black woman, right? But oftentimes, all of us who are, in some way, intersectional-- whether that be culture or sexuality or experience, intersectional in any kind of capacity-- we often get lumped together. And so coming into a

mainstream experience in a place that was unfamiliar to me with a rationale that was unfamiliar to me-- which is fine, right? Like we all grow, learn.

I had to learn that maybe my coming of age and identifying, hey, I'm Jeigh, but coming of age of that and identifying as a professional, the developmental pieces that some of us just experience, in the mainstream, I realized that at least it felt that there were a lot of things that were expected of me that were underspeak, that were not necessarily outlined.

For example, during this experience, I had the opportunity to-- I was requested to share my black experience as a support to my organization, right? I was very excited to share, but I felt a little uncomfortable, because if I hadn't had the opportunity to share and then I had a concern later, my fear was that my employer would say, well, I gave you an opportunity to respond and you chose not to. So that's that on that, as we say.

Or in other jobs, I had another experience with another supervisor who was black, and so there was an understanding, supposed, that myself and that supervisor would engage in the same way. But we were very different. And so going through that experience, it became very tumultuous. And I ended up having to seek different employment because of the way that I present myself, and she did not believe that was the way that a black woman in this area should.

And again, I'm speaking very specifically from my black experience, because I believe that that's a place of power that I can speak from. But I empathize with many different experiences, as that has been part of my learning and coming of age and amplifying voices.

But I feel that there are others who can also relate to being the only token item in a room, whatever that may be, and not wanting to not take advantage of the opportunity to share, which was my thing. But also, at times, feeling disempowered to actually share my true thoughts or actually be truly present because of the backlash or the perception or the idea that I was only in the room to check a box. And that my education, my time, my experience, none of that mattered, because I was here as a diversity hire. And being told by other colleagues to my face. So things like that have been some of the things I've navigated through in my coming of age in the mainstream.

OLGA TRUJILLO: Yeah. Really, when we were preparing-- this is Olga. Oh, which, by the way, folks, I just want to remind you, Jeigh and Jorge, because I keep forgetting as well, is to say our names first and then talk. So this is Olga. And when we were preparing for this webinar, I was pointing out that we're kind of different generations, right? But some of our experiences are still the same, which is super interesting to me.

So having been that, quote unquote, "diversity hire"-- or when I got into law school, the letter that I got tucked in with the acceptance was from the diversity program at the law school. So it was very clear to me that I was someone that was checking a box, too. And that was a long time ago. But still, we still feel this way quite a bit. So Jorge, tell us a little bit about your experience working in mainstream.

JORGE VIDAL: Yes. I also want to say that, Jeigh, thank you for starting and naming the discomfort that we may feel hearing our experiences. And I just want invite-- I don't know who's in the room, if there are leaders who work with the mainstream, there are mainstream organizations or cultural organizations. I know a few belong to cultural organizations. We just invite folks to sit in the discomfort and see what comes up for each one as you're hearing the stories.

Because we can easily disconnect and say, you know, that's not me. But I think through all of our identities, we all have identities of power. And we're also empowered by our identities. So it's really important to say that even though I am a gay man and Latino, there's a lot of privilege within my identity walking into a room, right? So I present masculine. I'm light-skinned Latino, so there's privilege within my identities, right?

So I think it's really important for us to also sit in that and say like, hey, I'm feeling discomfort. Where is that connected to?

What's coming up for me? And just feel your body. I think that's really, really important.

And I also want to say that when we were asking this question around how does it feel to navigate mainstream systems, I think about not just one system, as an immigrant, but I've navigated five, six different systems of mainstream, right? Thinking about my vocational system. So just coming into a space and you're an immigrant Latino, and you come into America with four different names. And they tell you, hey, that's not how we do it in America. We're going to need you Jorge Vidal, but your name is four names, right?

So how does discrimination happen from the day that you arrive in the US? So we have to name those things, right? And then you know being forced to kind of pledge allegiance to the United States without understanding. And then the absence of your culture, the absence of leaders that look like you, that represent you. And that also is tied up in the medical services, when you're seeking help. There's not ways that you can communicate.

So not, again, being validated of who you are coming into a space, right? And so what happens is that we normalize these systems to be the norm, right? So we believe that this is how it is in America, that in order for us to participate and thrive, as Olga says, we have to let go of who we are to come into this space.

And along the way, we kind of empower ourselves, and we say, hey, that's not the way that it should be. And it happens in the same way as the nonprofit. One of the things that I really thought about when I got into social work was, hey, it's going to look completely different. We're all about social justice, and we are all about healing and all of that and human rights, right? That's what we say.

But it doesn't really happen that way, right? There's some blind spots in the work that we do. And the way that it shows up is they're presenting ideas that are eurocentric, counseling techniques that doesn't reflect who we are and how we hold space for folks. I mean, I know a lot of Latino leaders and people of color who have navigated social work, and we know that we just have to learn, memorize, check the box, like Jeigh says, graduate, and then adapt.

And that's really how it has been also in nonprofit for me, in mainstream, is that we enter. We know that there's a language. There's a way that we write. There's a way that we speak. There's a way that we stand front of the room and that we have to perform a certain way in order for us to be seen as credible leaders in the movement, right?

And so I am mindful of that. And I think what Jeigh speaks is to what I also felt, being tokenized as Latino, as a gay man, as an immigrant person. I always call it kind of the Moses kind of effect,

right? So they bring you in, and they have this expectation of, hey, now that you have come into this space, I want you to bridge in all of your folks to come into our space.

And what Jeigh speaks about is I am a Latino, I'm Peruvian and South American, but I cannot-- and I need some work around Caribbean folks, right, learning their culture, learning the ways and the norms to bring people in. So there's a set of expectations that you come in as a Latino that you're going to bridge people in, but you still need to learn their culture, right? And so there's a time of learning that we're not allowed to have in those spaces.

I think it also gets exhausting, I think, in many ways, to over-explain yourself and plead your case that there's harm that has been caused. And I love the National Queer and Trans Therapist Network. They say that healing justice first must recognize that structural violence have caused harm, grief, and crisis and trauma and further cycles violence of oppressed people.

And so we have to first recognize that this structural violence has caused harm, right? And so pleading our case over and over and over that we're being harmed is harmful to us, right? And so the way that sometimes it shows up in conversations is we bring up our complaints, and we bring how we feel.

And you usually, let's play the devil's advocate conversation, right? Let's hear the other person. Are you sure you're feeling

this? So it kind of sounds like gaslighting in many, many times, no? So I think it's important to recognize how it shows up.

I think there's also a trigger, because I was kind of saying from the beginning that we navigate so many systems, and all the systems have harmed us in so many ways, that we are in the employment, that trigger that we feel in the moment is connected to a legacy of triggers. That has been my experience since I came to the US. And it is hard to speak about it in a way that makes sense to folks, right?

So when something shows up and somebody is policing the tone of my voice or policing the way that I speak or the way that I present myself, that's going to be triggering to me. And the way that I'm going to kind of come into that space is I'm going to disconnect. I'm not going to be myself, right? And so we're losing trust in the system, right?

So I think that's kind of like the beginning stages of it. Because I think that what happens, a lot of times, is when we start kind of doing the unlearn or unlearning in creating new spaces. We move to action really quick. It's like, how do we repair? But we don't allow folks to speak their truth. And I think for us to have healing, we have to speak and name the harm that has been placed on folks in order for us to move forward.

And I'm not saying to sit with the harm and let's attack the folks, because we all belong to a system that harms all of us. But we have to really name it in order for us to move forward. When we say and discount those harms and say, hey, you know, we're really sorry about the harm. OK, let's create another way of being. We're minimizing the pain and the trauma that has cost.

And so what we say is, stay with it. Let's work through it, and then let's move forward and not move so quickly into action. So I'll stop there, Olga. I know I said a lot. But I just want us to kind of create that moment to speak up.

OLGA TRUJILLO: Yeah. This is Olga. So thanks so much, Jorge. There's so much there. So I wanted to just bring in there's been quite a few comments in the chat of people really appreciating the thoughtfulness behind how we named the webinar, how we're thinking about it. And then, also, someone wrote that they have never felt so understood as they have in the last 30 minutes of sitting here and listening in this webinar, that everything that they've been fighting for has been validated for them.

So I just wanted you all to know this. So I wanted to bring in my experience a bit as well. So I grew up in Washington, DC. My mom was from Puerto Rico. My father was from Colombia. And I very vividly watched my mom experience the treatment of people reacting to the fact that she spoke English with a Puerto Rican accent. They had trouble understanding her. The ways in which

our names were constantly mispronounced or even joked around or anglicized in order for us to fit in better.

And in a lot of different ways, either through direct comments or body language or the way people rolled their eyes when they would hear my mom at the grocery store or when she applied for benefits or at school when she would go to meetings with our teachers, all those ways, I watched and I took it in, as well as watching my mom taking it in and what she did with it. I was a big study of my family, in large part because I grew up in a really abusive home, which is how I developed dissociative identity disorder.

And when you experience trauma, you're constantly watching, observing, and planning, basically, for safety, right? So I took all this in, in a home where there was so much violence. The impact of the way that my mom was treated was so much so that the two words that I heard the most when I was growing up was to enunciate and to assimilate. So when there's a home where there's so much violence and those are the two things that you hear parents saying to you over and over again, it gives you an idea of the way that the racism that my mom experienced-- it shows you how much that affected her.

And so I was taught to not value my culture. And I was taught more to not let people know that I was different, because different was less than. And so that's how I moved through the

world, which is I'm going to enunciate and I'm going to assimilate. And the problem with that is that I have been successful in navigating mainstream.

I went to law school. I graduated. I passed the bar. I worked at a large law firm, where I made a lot of money and hated the work. And then I went to the Department of Justice, where I heard things about who I was as a person put to me that I really didn't know what to do with.

Like I remember working in the Deputy Attorney General's Office in the early 1990s, where I was told that the best thing about me was that I was a Hispanic that didn't act like a Hispanic. And this is by somebody that was mentoring me. And I listened to that, and that feeds into I'm not supposed to act the way a Latina acts. I'm not supposed to sound like I speak Spanish. I'm not supposed to-- you know.

And I move through the world now really feeling other than people, because I'm not white, even though my mom wanted us to be treated as though we were white. And at times, I feel like I'm not Latina enough because of my mom's internalized racism and how she then filtered that to us as to not being good enough, as well as the trauma of abuse happening in Spanish. So there's lots and lots of layers into who I show up with in my work.

And I know lots of other people that experience this as well. So I know I say I have DID. Actually, let me take a minute now so we can switch interpreters, and then I'll come back to this.

OK, thanks so much for that. So I know I say I have DID. So if you don't know what DID is, it used to be called multiple personality disorder. And I want to make sure that-- so I walk through the world at the intersections of being queer, Latina, a person with DID, gender nonconforming. So I feel other than most of the time.

But I felt like I had to be one way at work and another way with my friends. And then there was my friends that were white and then my friends that were people of color. And the place that I felt probably the most at home was with my friends that were people of color. And it took a long time to even feel at home there, but I felt more accepted. I felt like I could be myself.

So when you're somebody that has DID, it's really easy to go from being very mainstream to being more Latina. When you're in those work environments, you are just focusing on the work. But people around you are actually very focused on how you represent. I was reminded of that over and over again in the sense that-- so, for example, the person who was mentoring me who said to me that the good thing about me was that I was Hispanic that didn't act like Hispanic, that was a very powerful thing to hear and not really know what to do with.

The other thing is I had lots of people who I worked for-- this is mostly at the Department of Justice, at the time-- that would often call me the name of other Latinas that worked in the agency, even though I didn't look at all like them. I was 30 years old, and there was a 56-year-old woman named Inez that ran the civil rights section of our agency, and I was the general counsel. And the Assistant Attorney General often referred to me as Inez.

I didn't look like her. I wasn't anywhere like her. But I was a Latina, and she clumped us together. And that's how I knew that over and over again. So these subtle things all kind of build and build. And it affects who we are and how we represent, how we show up in organizations. And it's, again-- and I'll turn this over to you, Jeigh. But it's what Jorge said about gaslighting.

And I've been talking about this a lot more lately, because I've been seeing this more. And this is hard for anyone. But people who have experienced trauma-- which is people who grew up in homes with trauma, but also Black, Indigenous, and other people of color in the US have experienced trauma because of racism and how it's built into our systems.

So what happens is we come with all of that. And you don't really know about it, necessarily, if you're working with us. But the things that you say and do, when those things don't match up, then that's triggering for us. So it's not that people are intentionally trying to do things poorly or do things in a way

that's not trustworthy. It's that we say a lot of things and then we do other things, and we don't always pay attention to that.

Or we want to be that way. We all have our best intentions of wanting to be very open, wanting to adapt to the people who work with us, wanting to be the best supervisors, managers, co-workers. But you might ignore something or not do something or not step up and say something, and that is really powerful for people who have experienced trauma, either because of racism or trauma or lots of other stuff.

So, Jeigh, I know that you had some thoughts as well from the conversation that we're having, so jump in.

JEIGH BILLINGY: Yes. So much truthiness. I love it. Two things that, Olga and Jorge, you both have shared that I really wanted to highlight, one thing was something that Jorge had said, which was the trigger we feel in the moment is triggered by a legacy of triggers. And the word legacy really resonated with me, because there's a history, an intentional, perpetuated history, in the concept of the word legacy.

Now, when we think about what legacy is and we talk about developmental stages in sociology and in therapy and clinical places, we get to a stage in life where a lot of us want to say, what is my legacy? Oftentimes, our grandparents, those of us who are late 50s and beyond, often can find themselves in a

legacy-building stage. What have I made of my life? Retirement age and beyond, right?

The other thing that Olga had shared that I thought was really, really meaningful was that there are lots of layers as to who I show up with in the workplace. And I think these two concepts are very, very important. I just have a few points I'd like to hit, if that's OK, that really just spoke to me.

All of us have spoken today on the model minority myth. I'm sure some of us know the history of how that came, with some Asian-American students who kind of coined the term as they were fighting during the civil rights time and how that's kind of evolved. Actually, there's a lot of Black American and Asian-American animosity in coining of the terminology, because often, the model minority myth has been used to discredit Black communities.

However, all of us who are considered minorities or BIPOC-- which is not necessarily an all-inclusive term when we talk about minorities, but that's a whole other concept. When we talk about those spaces and the model minority myth, the idea is that, hey, you are articulate. If you are highly educated, if you are-- and I'm translating this here-- over-performing, we're OK with you being here.

And again, this is not necessarily the intentional headspace, so please don't hear that the idea is that people are intentionally creating these spaces. But because of stereotypes of how one can achieve and succeed, sometimes unintentionally, that's perpetuated legacy of what it means to show up with layers as a minority or otherwise intersect individual-- intersectional, sorry, individual in our communities.

The other piece of that, then, is the microaggressions. Because again, I like to believe the best, so I do not assume that people who are leading the workspaces or those of us who may not be but are interacting in the workspace, in whatever capacity we're in, are intentionally trying to create a place of harm. However, we all have very-- whether or not we partake in the media culture, we're all inundated with tons of ideas of what a thug is, for example, or what ghetto means, for example.

These are things that are inundated with songs, music, billboards, right? So these things can create a space where we can have a microaggressive climate towards each other and towards people who trigger this idea within us, that this person is-- they haven't pulled themselves up by their own bootstraps, or one day they'll, fill in the blank. This idea that they're constantly vague. There's an us/them constantly performing, achieving.

So we end up saying things like, oh, you're so articulate. Or unintentionally referring to somebody as the name of someone

else who's also whatever that person may be. It may not be intentional, but because we have not created a culture of being present and being mindful as we interact, oftentimes these microaggressive climates can reiterate this legacy of generationalized and systemic trauma that now is causing a mental health response in that person.

But because those of us who show up in multicultural, intersectional spaces are considered strong people, we are assumed that we are just going to keep pushing through. But keep pushing through is really, really, really-- it's coming from a place of survival.

OLGA TRUJILLO: I wanted to jump in here for a second, Jeigh. This is Olga. Because what happens is that in a mainstream organization, when that happens, when a person of color is triggered because of something that they're hearing or a way that they're being treated that feels like stuff from the past, that they'll have a reaction and then be blamed for that reaction, as if there's something wrong with them because of how they reacted. Because people aren't being open enough to see the impact of the things that they're doing.

And that kind of being cognizant. So then a person of color is then ostracized or seen as the problem. And I know Jorge has something he wanted to add as well. Jorge?

JORGE VIDAL: So many good things I wanted to add. Jeigh, thank you for that, putting that context, too. Because I think what happens-- and I think one of the comments I was just kind of reading-- I did notice the chat box-- is this gaslighting, right? And it's very true, it is also non-verbal, because sometimes-- I don't know how to describe that look. When you're explaining to someone that this is happening to you, and there's a look that they give you that you already sense this person is not believing or I have to enroll this person or I have to teach this person. And where do I start?

Do I unpack and make connections for the person to understand and see what I'm sensing in that moment? So when you start beginning to explain or having that moment, it just becomes, again, exhausting, right? And that moment becomes really exhausting. And when you're triggered, you're no longer able to have a linear thought, a linear way of talking to somebody to make sense.

So when you're not having those linear thoughts or explain it to a way that a person can understand within a mainstream, what happens to what Jeigh says, right? You're being discounted. So it's not just the toning of our tone, but also policing the way that we speak and how we speak. And that's how it shows up, right?

And so when we have one model person of color kind of moving up the ranks, the system is also creating ways for us to not work

together, for us to kind of fight against each other. Because then it becomes the conversation, oh, Jorge, he's acting all white, because he wants to be part of the in group, right?

And so it is not us that we're fighting, because that's the one thing that often comes into our conversation and into our space, right? It's like, why are they fighting? Why are the Blacks and Latinos-- no. And I think one of the questions that we're going to be talking about, too, is how it shows up in cultural spaces as well, right? It seems like we're fighting one another. It's because the system has created this myth that in order for us to survive, we have to kind of play these rules. And when we do play the rules, there's some people that are being left behind.

And so in that fighting that battle and our triggers, we are blaming each other for it, right? But I think that's the work that has to come as a community healing, where we kind of have to see that we're all in the same struggle together. There's no way that we're both being discounted, right?

And I also kind of want to say that what Jeigh's saying, that nobody's intentionally harming, but we're all capable of harming. And it's really important, that distinction, because I think, again, I am a male that often work in women's spaces. My maleness shows up in spaces. And if I don't pay attention to the way that I take space, the way that I show up, and the way that I'm taking credit or not giving credit to women for teaching me all of this

stuff that I have learned along this path, I am harming women, right? I'm harming them, right?

And so I'm always kind of noticing the way that I am showing up in spaces. So, yes, my intent is not to harm, but I am capable of harming, because I have identities of privilege. And I have to always kind of think about that. And when we see that sometimes, I think it becomes very kind of reactive, when we name those things and say, no, no, that's not me, and I'm not trying to do that. Again, then we go into this conversation of gaslighting, proving our case. And that constantly creates those moments, right?

I wanted to say other things, but I think that's-- I'll leave it there. I think I'm going all over the place now, Olga. Te lo paso ti. I'll pass that over to you.

OLGA TRUJILLO: Yeah, yeah. That's awesome. And I'm going to go back to Jeigh, because I know I cut you off, Jeigh. But I wanted to touch on something that you mentioned. And then I just want to kind of-- oh, I'm going all over the place, too.

So I have a list of things that I'm writing down, because in about five minutes, I want to turn us over to strategies. And what I want to do is I want to have strategies for the people of color who are working in mainstream organizations that are on the call, but also for people who are not of color but work in the mainstream

organizations and are trying to learn, OK, so what does this mean? I might find myself in some of this, and what does this mean for our work? How do I do this?

And I remembered the thing that I wanted to point out, because you were raising you're a man working in women's spaces. So I wanted to call out something that I have struggled with for a really long time and haven't known what to do with that, which is I'm a light-skinned Latina. I am a citizen. I'm a well-educated Latina that doesn't make people feel uncomfortable, for the most part.

And so I am asked to be in spaces that my darker skinned sisters are not always asked to be in or the people who speak with an accent or people who present differently are not asked to be in. And I know the impact of that is that I'm, again, doing that kind of, quote unquote, "model" minority. So I just kind of want to call that out. It's something I'm struggling with as well, and I have some ideas for other people who might find themselves in those shoes as well.

So, Jeigh, I want to go back to you, but one second. Let me just check, are we due for a interpreter change, or am I premature? Oh, in about four minutes. OK, in about 4 minutes. All right, Jeigh, go for it.

JEIGH BILLINGY: Well, I do have one thought that I really wanted to bring up, too, to your previous point. There's just so much, again, juicy, juicy, good stuff here. I, too, am taking notes, because I'm like, man, this is so good. But you mentioned when you're with your friends and people you're close to and even other people of color, sometimes it's more comfortable in certain capacities.

I'm not sure-- and please pop in and correct me if this is a term that's applicable as well-- but in the Black community, we call it code switching. Like you switch up the code. So when I'm with you, we going to talk about, you know what I'm saying? We got a code. But when I'm in a professional environment, there's a place and a time to employ the appropriate diction and to share.

And to some extent, we all do this as a part of just engaging and being comfortable. But a lot of us who are model minorities have learned to code switch as a means and a mechanism for survival. Otherwise, we are excluded, whether it be accent or the ways that we talk about certain things. Like you were saying, Olga, enunciate. These are things that we've all been told to do.

And I just really want to highlight that as another layer of the trauma, because again, this identity. Who am I, and what am I bringing-- what makes me great in my performance? What do I bring? What skills do I show up with? And those pieces, I think, is

just really, really meaningful, I would say, to highlight. Thank you for letting me share that.

OLGA TRUJILLO: Yeah, yeah. And I was hesitant. The reason I was hesitant to say it is because code switching is totally what I was talking about, but because I have DID and I have different parts, when I talk about switching, it might be from one part to another part. So that's why I decided to describe what it was instead so that it wouldn't be confusing, and then I get all confused in what I'm saying at the same time.

JEIGH BILLINGY: Makes sense.

OLGA TRUJILLO: Yeah. So if it's OK, I want to switch us to some strategies. Does that feel too premature? Are we ready for strategies? Oh, and then let's do an interpreter change now as well.

OK, so what kind of strategy-- let's talk first about for people of color that are in mainstream organizations. What are some strategies that have supported your work or that you would recommend in retrospect? So I'll go back to you, Jeigh.

JEIGH BILLINGY: Yes. I always love-- I'm a don't talk about it, be about it kind of person. So I love this part. First, one of the things-- and I would start off with strategies. A wise, wise man named Jorge once told me that if I am in a position-- and I'm

paraphrasing what I had taken away from that conversation. But if I am in a position where I feel that I am second-guessing myself, that's inappropriate. Just cut it right there.

Because if I am being gaslight to think that, for some reason, my expertise, my knowledge, my showing up is inaccurate in some way-- and it may be, but I should have a safe space to feel. And I'm kind of adding to this now. So if we're talking about strategies for the person, one, don't second-guess yourself. It's OK to fail, and you should have a safe space to fail, to learn, and to get back up without feeling like there's retaliation or unsafe experience financially, socially, emotionally, mentally.

The other thing that I would say to the person-- I'm going to say a few things for the person and then a few things for leaders and organizations. Stop, drop, and roll.

OLGA TRUJILLO: Let's do the person first, and then we'll come back and do leaders, if that's OK.

JEIGH BILLINGY: Awesome. Absolutely. OK, so staying with the person. This is a theory that I have created and I use in my practice at SUSPIRE to teach just self-awareness, and I call it stop, drop, and roll. A lot of us have learned that when it comes to fires, right? If you are ever on fire, stop, drop, and roll.

So to stop and just pause. What's going on around you, push pause. Listen to the narratives, the stories that are being told. The second thing, drop. Drop into your feelings. What are you noting? Where in your body do you feel what's happening? Just drop into that presence, that awareness.

And then roll with it. Roll with what is organic to you. Roll with what is normal to you. Roll with what is ideal to you. Another thing that I say often is say it and we'll clean it up later. I understand that there can be repercussions. I'm not saying be irresponsible. But functionally, most of us got into the employment space because we had some sort of capacity, right? So if we're trusting that piece of ourselves that's developing, as life is a journey, then if we can stop, drop, and roll with what feels right, what's the next best thing, ideally, we can find a place and a position of self-empowerment and to speak truth to power, because we are leaning into what is organic and what is true and what is part of what has been revealed to our way of being.

Also, be honest with yourself and be honest with what's around you. Come to the table. It is OK to come to the table. It is OK to sit at the table. It is OK to eat at the table. And when I say the table, I'm referring to the collective opportunity of having a voice, of being able to share your thoughts equitably and intentionally, to be in purpose on purpose. I think that is what I would say to the individual.

OLGA TRUJILLO: Awesome. It's funny, I have very similar things, saying them a little bit differently. But I'm going to go to Jorge first, and then I'll come back and kind of close up that little section before we go into helping leaders.

JORGE VIDAL: How can I follow that, Jeigh? It's so good. I know. Well, I first kind of want to step back a little bit before kind of going into offering-- because I recognize that we are doing a webinar, so we're moving fast. But this healing process takes a long time for us. And it takes a long time for us to even be in a space to be OK to talk about it, right?

For me, with George Floyd and all these conversations around racism, allyship, it kind of triggered me a lot. Because I think for me, who have experienced racism and oppression in different ways, I was never believed. Or I was always kind of double-guessing myself, like this happened. Somebody said that, right? These things actually happened.

And when you leave a situation like that, there's always a place within you that you don't believe that actually happened. You accommodate it, you make the bed, and then you say, you know what? Actually, I don't know that that happened. And so I always start, when I do this work with other friends or leaders or even myself, first I affirm that I believe you, what your experience are valid, and this actually does happen, right?

Because I think that's the one way that we are so discounted, that our stories are not visible. They're not validated. And so I always start with that idea that I hear you and I see you, because I think that's really, really important to kind of name, right?

I think the other piece for me that is really important is that we don't all have the luxury to leave places. I started as an outreach worker, and I moved up in different ways. And in the beginning, I couldn't leave. I couldn't. I had to survive in that place. But I started to learn how to do safety planning within a mainstream organization. And the way that I did that was I started learning the lingo. I started learning the way to move in and out of that place.

And for me, what I found the most useful and I still used today and I have learned around is the power of relationships and also how to create a family bond with folks outside of mainstream. Because I think the way that abuse-- and all of you know, because you work with survivors in some case. The way that abuse happens and stays alive within you is that they isolate you. And it's the same way that I think it happens in systems. They try to isolate you, and they try not to form connections, right?

And the way that we do that sometimes is, for example, in conferences. Think about the people who actually attend conferences. There's a process for you to attend. They select the people who you have to attend. And so, in that moment, we're

robbing the opportunity for us to be connected with other folks. So what I have learned always is the fact that there's relationships that I have that I could use to kind of seize other opportunities. So there's power relationships.

And I always have found family and mentors along the way that has helped me to survive in places that I didn't think I was able to survive. And that kind of gave me a buffer within this system. And then it gave me an action plan to say, OK, the next few months, I'm about to-- where's my exit strategy within two months?

I would also offer changing kind of the narrative. Because I think Jeigh kind of talked a little bit about code switching, right? Now it kind of adapted-- and I love this, from the Latino Project. I went to a webinar. And I was thinking about it because I think this is really powerful for us to think about it. Code switching could also be a power for us, right? Because we have learned to navigate and learn four different languages.

Like I could speak Spanish. I could speak English. I could throw you some bilingual. And then I could kind of do some professional stuff along the way. And I could sprinkle it all over the place. So how do we code switch is also kind of power for us, right?

And so I think of like what are my superpowers that connect it to-- I'm not into superheroes. So I'm not one of those guys that love

superhero and grew up with superheroes. But I love the idea of superpower as how we talk about the work. I know you love that, but I can't connect to it. I didn't grew up with it.

I think it was that hypermasculinity that kind of turned me off, you know? And I didn't have gay superpowers. Like there was no gay superpowers that we can kind of talk about, so I was like, no, that's not for me. I did love the outfits, but not the actual shows.

But what I will say is, for me, the superpowers, enhanced senses. Enhanced senses, for me, is really important, because I am, through all of my identities-- like being a survivor, being immigrant, being a Latino, being gay, all of that-- has given me a sense of enhanced senses to recognize where I am not safe. And that's really powerful for us.

So I can now go in with a person, and I could just tell by the way that person is performing, acting, talking, or even bringing me in that this is not a safe space. I could walk into a space and say, this is not safety for me. So then, in that moment, I take care of myself. So enhanced senses is really important. It's a superpower.

Shapeshifting that we talk about is also a superpower, because I think that we have been able to be adaptable in many ways, right? So I'm a gay man that have worked with men, usual, heterosexual men, so I had to shift the way that I actually am in

those spaces in order to survive. And I see that as a way of adaptability now. Because I've moved in five different states. I've worked in Puerto Rico. I worked in Florida. I worked in DC, in New York.

And that adaptability has been really helpful for me to be in different places and bring allyship in those different places. Forcefields, like superpower has this forcefields that they create. And I always think about that. I'm like, actually, if I really think about it, my ancestors have been giving me forcefields since that day that I was kind of born, right? They put me in this protective layer of my worth and my customs and all that stuff, right?

And I think about that because I think that I've been able to create forcefields along the way that I never really talked about. And it's hard for me to talk about it, because I'm just making sense of it, right? And so I think about that. But that's definitely a superpower for me.

And then, also, the flight. I think we always think of flight as like the response to stress. But I think what's really important is when you start knowing your self-worth and accepting that there's not only one way of doing these things, you say, you know what? There's a different way to do it. And my superpower's to leave this place and create a different place. Create my family, be with family who believe, who believes me, believes in a different way of doing this work. And we're going to create this ecosystem that

is culturally responsive, that affirms diversity, that welcomes diversity and is not afraid to be in rooms with people who are diverse, right?

And so I think that's a really, really superpower that I have adapted from being a survivor, right? So, for me, the way that I'm kind of framing this conversation-- and I would love, if anyone is interested in the way that I kind of talk about superpowers, I would love to talk about it and give it more information. But that's the way that I see it. I've been able to change the narrative on the way that I talk to myself, and that removes the shame on me and places that shame on other people.

And that's really powerful for us. You know it. As survivors, we always think that it is us who created this situation or it was us that put ourselves in this situation. But when we remove that conversation, it gives us power, right? So I will leave it there, Olga.

OLGA TRUJILLO: Yeah, that was awesome. This is Olga. You're both-- really, this information is just awesome. Yeah, yeah, I totally want to snap my fingers. So I feel like it's almost time for a interpreter change. Am I right? Am I pushing you guys, by the way? I don't mean to.

OK, got it. OK, not yet. So I love the way, Jorge, that you described the superpower. Because of course, I love-- and it's because I have the idea-- I look at the idea as a superpower. Most people will look at it as a disorder or this big challenge, and it's challenging, too. But because I was able to, by creating parts, survive a really abusive home.

And that has been my gift, quite honestly, for moving through the world from job to job and building a career. So I just have to show you Mr. Incredible, once again. Part of the reason that I love that action figure so much is because The Incredibles was about superheroes that were also, in their saving of people, creating damage. And lawyers then started suing them. And because I'm a lawyer, I identified with that kind of.

Anyway, so the other thing that I wanted-- I just wanted to add a couple of things. So one is-- and this really has been said by both. I'm just saying it a little bit differently. One is don't expect that you're going to stay in one place for a really long time. Because if you do, it's awesome. Perfect. Great. But be strategic.

When you work in a mainstream organization and you're a person of color, you want to pay really close attention to what's going on around you. Like Jorge said, and Jeigh as well, is don't second-guess yourself. Because we are innately listening to what people say to us and watch what people do. And when those two things don't match up, that's what feels like gaslighting to us, right?

When people say something, and in their minds, they may think they're doing them, but in our observation, they're not necessarily doing them. And that can build over time and get to be really difficult to work with. I like the advice that Jeigh gave that I'll just say again is advocate for yourself, right? And so I try to do it-- I try to advocate with love, meaning I try to go in a place-- I try not to bring things up until I'm not angry.

And I'm not trying to say that you shouldn't bring things up if you're angry. But it just works better for me, because then I don't second-guess myself. So I wait till I'm not angry anymore or till I have a handle on the anger, because then I'm more focused in what I say. And so then I can advocate for myself. I can't stay working in an organization if I can't call out the inconsistencies or the lack of trust that's happening, because people are saying one thing and doing a different thing.

In some organizations, I haven't been able to do it, because it didn't feel safe to do it. And it wasn't that anyone said anything to me. It's because I was watching and listening. And that's the forcefield piece that Jorge talked about, meaning that when you're in an organization, you're taking everything in. And you're figuring out what you can do and can't do. Who can you get close to? Who can't you get close to? What can you say? What can't you say?

So you're creating, basically, that forcefield of how do I survive in this organization. So those are all things that people of color do very, very naturally, because we've had to our whole lives. And we don't even think that we're doing it anymore. We just do it. And so the ways in which you can be strategic is figure out what it is that you can learn from this organization.

So there's skills that you bring to your work that you know how to do. And there are some things that you don't do very well. And so find ways, while you're in an organization, to build up that capacity to do some of the other things that you don't do as well. Because you're going to take your really well-developed skills that you were hired for and the skills that you build up to the next place that you work at. And then you're going to have even more to advocate for and more ways of talking through.

The other thing is I'm going to-- I'm not really sure how to say this, but I'm going to say it kind of carefully. Try really hard not to burn bridges. I'm going to be really transparent. This has been really hard for me, to not burn a bridge. Because I also have such a hard time seeing when people are saying something and doing something differently.

And so, oftentimes, I have to bring that up. And in some cases, I haven't done it very gracefully, and I have burned bridges. And those bridges really kind of haunted me. One, I'm not my best

self when I do that. And two, people get really mad at you, and they don't--